

# FELLOW TRAVELLER

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**LARGE DAMS - AT WHOSE COST AND FOR WHOSE BENEFIT.**



The experience with large dams in India, once promoted as the "temple of modern India", has been far from positive. Widespread report of environmental damage, social disruption, economic unviability, poor performance and inequalities in distribution of benefits, have plagued the construction of these dams even as their promoters try desperately to project them as development miracles.

Environmental impacts have included, upstream (including reservoir): (1) soil erosion; (2) micro-climatic changes; (3) loss of forests, flora, and fauna; (4) changes in floral and faunal density and diversity; (5) change in fisheries, especially on spawning grounds; (6) chain effects on catchment area due to construction, displacement, etc.; (7) landslips, siltation and sedimentation; (8) breeding of vectors in reservoir and increase in related diseases; (9) seismicity; (10) loss of non-forest land; (11) water logging around reservoir; and (12) growth of weeds.

Downstream (including command area): (1) water logging and salinity; (2) reduced water flow and deposition in river, with related impacts on aquatic ecosystem, flora and fauna; (3) micro-climatic changes; (4) flash floods; (5) salt-water ingress at river mouth; (6) changes in coastal ecosystem (e.g., mangroves); (7) loss of land fertility along river; and (8) vector breeding and increase in related diseases.

Social disruption, due to displacement of people from the submerged areas, is even more horrifying. Millions (no accurate estimate is available) of people, a majority of them already poor and disprivileged, have been uprooted and further impoverished. A large number of servants, beggars, sweepers, and other members of the "development refugee". Only recently have major improvements been made in the rehabilitation policies, but a vast majority of oustees remain outside the scope of such improvements.

And what are all these costs for? Do the benefits justify them? Again, shockingly, the government has never made comprehensive evaluation of the performance of large dams. Whatever evidence is available, suggests that performance has often been so poor that the dams may not be economically viable.

This is not to say that there have been no benefits. Clearly, irrigation and power generation have greatly helped India's developmental process. But even these benefits have been soured by the realisation that most gains are cornered by large farmers, industrialists, and urban consumers, while the poor get left out. Dams have often increased the inequalities present in our society.

All this points to the critical need to through re-assessment of all past and proposed dams, from environmental, social, economic, and equity points of view. It also indicates that the time for more decentralised, smaller scale alternatives have come—these include watershed management, dryland farming, drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, and many others that were traditionally in practice, or which are being newly developed and used by communities all over India.

ASHISH KOTHARI

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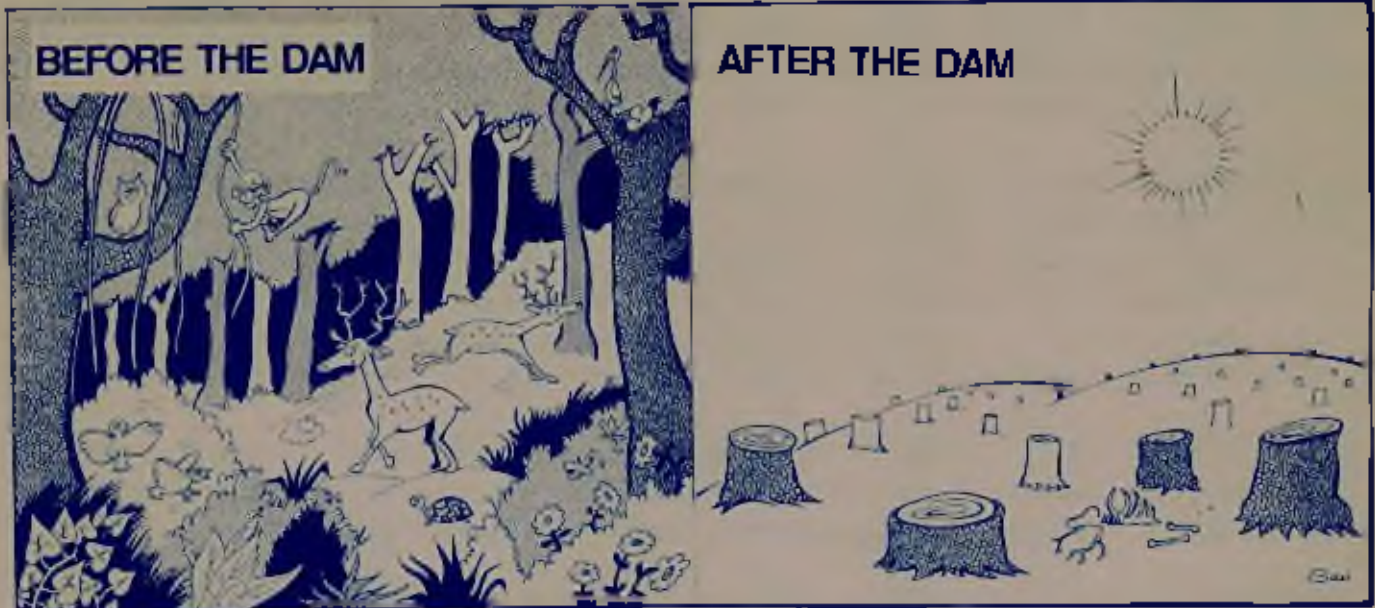
## The Voice From Narmada

Excerpt from 'The 1991 Right Livelihood Award Acceptance speech by Medha Patkar for the Narmada Bachao Andolan'

More than one hundred and fifty thousand people in and around the bountiful and peaceful valley of Narmada are forced to raise a struggle of life and death. They have declared a total opposition to their uprootment and to its root cause, the Sardar Sarovar project. They are tribals and poor people, farmers and labourers, fishermen and forest produce gatherers, small enterprisers and artisans, belonging to about 250 communities. They are united through the generations by the rich habitat, the Narmada Valley, and now by sharing and unprecedented catastrophe.

The fight has not been an easy one. The tribal people have had to walk down hundreds of kilometers crossing rugged mountain ranges, and men and also women come out on the streets for protest actions and mass-politics hitherto unknown to them. Later they were taken as a threat to the illegitimate and inhuman plans and policies that favour a handful of vested interest. Since then, the peaceful agitators from the valley have had to face hell—the brutal caning and other forms of force, false legal accusations and arrests, cheating and other ill treatment in the extravagant campaign against the movement, disrespect and deception, insensitivity and unexpected callousness even towards their right to life and their fight for the same.





Today 300 or more people-men and women, young and old from the villages-are in jail for no reason of theirs, but for having taken to the most non violent way of protest within the boundaries of their own village against the dam related survey work undertaken with the help of 100 armed policemen armed with slings, tear gas shell and guns. The most critical phase is ahead of us, and the commitment of our save or drown squads to be resolve "DOOBENGE PER NAHIN HATENGE"-'Will drown but not move'-will be put to test in the next few months.

But they are not alone. Similar struggles are on in the other valleys and hills, Tehri and Suvamarekha in India, Kedung Ombo in Indonesia, Bulbino in Brazil.

It is at this moment that the struggle is being recognized as symbolic guiding force in the terms of the perspective propounded and the people's power expressed. We accept the 'Right Livelihood award' with all humility at our command as an expression of solidarity and support to the cause. We accept this prestigious honour with a feeling of unprecedented responsibility to propound just the sustainable development through a worldwide movement.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan today would earnestly request the world community to acknowledge the fact that Sardar Sarovar (SSP) and such project are unjust and unjustifiable human and environmental devastation. They are claimed to have been appraised but that is within a faulty framework of costs and benefits (like a GNP without a measure of environmental degradation), and exercise of manipulated data-generation and distorted valuations. They swallow large chunks of our millennia old capital-land, forest, water, cultural and archaeological sites and monuments; and drain financial resources giving some greening and glowing benefits but for a much shorter period than expected. They cannot be built unless the people in the valleys are chated by enforcing unjust modern laws and unless their valient struggles for right to life are crushed.

Sardar Sarovar, the focus of opposition, is the largest out of 30 major irrigation and hydro power projects, with 3165 other dams proposed to be build in the Valley of Narmada.

The environmental impact assessment always was further away from the ideal. The fast silted reservoirs and waterlogged command areas of other dams in India stand testimony to the unavoidable future of SSP if pushed ahead at this cost, uninvestigated and ill-planned. At whose cost,..... And for whose benefit.

But these are just a few glimpses of the untold truth behind the "dream of lifeline" which the common people are made to believe in. And so the project goes on... Even when the sanction under the law of our land are withdrawn by the official authority. When Independent Review initiated by the World Bank is on. When the people in the Valley are not ready to move out even if to die... It is still not too late. The world of commons-if not the houses and parliaments, the ministers and conferences-have no choice but to take a pause, listen and act.

There is no other way but to redefine "modernity" and the goals of development, not to narrow it to "environment" but to widen it to a sustainable, equitable and just society based on harmonious and non-exploitative relationship between human being to human being.

Non-violent opposition to the uncivilized traditions of big dams and mega projects like Narmada, with our soils converted into weapons, ready to defend our way of life, even if our bodies are flushed out, can be our humble attempt not just to save the Valley but humankind.

PALLAVI

### **The Dunkel Proposal \_ Operation Salvage.**

"The Dunkel proposals will increase the prices of essential drugs by ten times", stated Mr. Chidambaram, Union Commerce Minister, recently. Perhaps that was just a tip of the ice-berg which has become a major threat to the sovereignty of India.

The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMS) and Dunkel proposals are the deadly traps into which Third World countries like India are forcibly led to. "These discussions and terms and conditions are not at all in the interest of our nation, the proposals should be rejected and India should not sign it" said the memorandum signed unanimously by more than 250 members of the Parliament who joined hands together cutting across all party lines. This explains the gravity of the matter.

The issues owes its origin to a process which started long back. Even though colonies were abandoned by western rulers, the process of economic exploitation (the purpose for which the western rulers established colonies) continued.

Through a systematic strategy named neo colonization, third world countries were exploited. This had directly led to economic destabilization making most of these resource-rich countries fall into the dangerous web of debt trap.

This process is further pushed ahead, to squeeze whatever little resource has been left out by the greedy super powers. The GATT, TRIPS, IMP, World Bank are 'ivory castles' which function for this purpose. What else does the anti-people policies and programmes directed by these agencies demonstrate?

Africa and Latin America are examples, where living beings are reduced to skeletons and rich forests to deserts. It is the result of the 'much publicized' and 'well planned' development process.

Should we allow this to continue? How much risk can we afford to take? Only a political solution-an operation with firm commitment to the interests of our own people can improve the situation.

- Dr. Unnikrishnan pax.